A LOOK BACK

Mysterious Easter Island Described by a Passenger on Once-a-Year Steamship

New York Herald Tribune, 1933; In three parts.

"German Newspaper Man tells of Visiting Polynesian Colony 2,000 Miles Off Chile; Huge Statues Carved from Lava Centuries Ago Continue to Puzzle Archaeologists.

Easter Island, 2000 miles off the coast of Chile, is one of the archaeological mysteries of the South Seas. On it are hundreds of huge statues carved from compressed volcanic ash. How the primitive people could have transported these images has never been explained. The island is owned by Chile, which leases the sheep-breeding rights to a British firm. Once a year this company sends a vessel to bring back wool and cattle. Heinz Hell, a German newspaperman, made the trip on the vessel's most-recent voyage. He has written three articles describing the island and its people[1]*."*

By Heinz Hell

Once a year a ship prepares to sail out of the harbor at Valparaíso, Chile, for a long trip to Rapanui, the isolated Easter Island – the most easterly outpost of the Polynesian world. The English firm which controls a lease permitting sheep breeding sends this packet steamer once a year to bring back wool and cattle, trading many things with the people of Hanga Roa, the only village on the island.

For one week each year life in Rapanui feverishly quickens as horsemen sweep the streets at a gallop for Hanga Pico, the port of call; people shout and laugh. Then Rapanui slips back into its slumber to dream again of a bygone glory or a future enriched by many new blessings which civilization will bring to them.

Won Passage After Difficulty

A wisp of smoke on the horizon announces that the boat is nearing. On the steamer's most recent voyage the writer was aboard. It was not an easy matter to obtain the necessary permissions to make the trip. The government authorities said there were certain secret political matters which did not concern journalists. The English firm wanted to know whether I was not making this trip secretly to investigate the possibilities of exploiting the lobster trade. Under no conditions, I gave my word. Finally the Ministry of Marine said that no one would obtain permission to leave with the boat. This information came to me after I had already reached Valparaíso, ready to go aboard.

The German embassy stepped into the breech for me and I now sat on the deck of the steamer Coyhaique, which would bring me in the course of eleven days to Rapanui, the most remote island in the world. It is practically in the South Sea, 2,000 miles from the coast of South America and 5,000 miles from Australia.

The steamer made its way silently through the night, deeper, ever deeper into the Pacific. It was not a large packet – about 1,000 tons – and so far I had met only four other passengers aboard her besides myself. These were two men in the employ of the English firm who would have charge of the transportation of the cattle on the return trip, a physician and a priest who was going to fulfill a government mission on Rapanui. The crew came from the island of Chiloe, the captain was Danish, the first engineer Swiss and the second engineer of German extraction.

At about 7 o'clock on the morning of the eleventh day out the boat dropped anchor twelve miles to the southwest of Easter Island. I stood by the rail with a map in my hand, getting my bearings. The deep mist there to my left must be Cook's Bay. Captain Cook landed here in 1747 on his second trip around the world, accompanied by the German naturalist – explorers Reinhardt and George Forster, who handed down the first scientific data on Rapanui. There, lying somewhat back of it, must be Hanga Roa. Through the glasses I could see horsemen galloping along a tree-lined road, scurrying children and gaily colored women's clothes. The whole village was in a flurry of excitement.

It was unfortunate that we lay so far away, but a dangerous coastline prevented our anchoring any nearer to it. The waves tumbled in huge billows over the lava rocks, dashed over a sand bar and with thirty-foot leaps broke into a rocky wall. From this point the land rose in gentle slopes toward the north to the edge of the Rano Aroi, toward the south to the Rano Kao, both long extinct volcanoes with deep craters.

Visited by "Marines"

A boat, filled to the brim with "marine officers" in full dress, came through an opening in the sand bar and approached us. As they came closer we could see that the officers were not wearing shoes or stockings. Gold lace and stars where they did not belong; clothes half-unbuttoned and showing colored patches on arms and trouser seats; khaki breeches and admirals' coats, but with the insignia of a "captain lieutenant" gracing their caps. The men of Hanga Roa!

A diminutive man, dressed in white linen and wear-

[1] This is surely one of the more obscure early accounts we have encountered. While sketchy (one longs for more details), it does provide a look into the island in those early days when the island was under the control of the sheep company, Williamson-Balfour. Published in March of 1933 in three installments of the *New York Herald Tribune*, the author describes his visit to many of the island's sites and his encounters with Rapanui islanders. The article was illustrated by some grainy photographs, sadly not of sufficient quality to reprint here. They include a view of Rano Kau's crater, several of the *moai* in the quarry, and one of some woodcarvings intended for exchange when a vessel comes to the island. And who was Heinz Hell? Sorry, but we are clueless.

ing a cork hat so big it cast a shadow over his whole body, stepped up the gangway of our steamer. He was a sub-delegate from the island, a government official and a person to be reckoned with. He shook each one of us by the hand and proceeded to shiver the deck with a bombast of verbiage. Following behind him came the "captain lieutenants." These were South Sea People, Kanakas, powerfully built, with shaper profiles quite unlike the Chileans. Malaysians and Polynesians – representatives of two different races who spoke the same language and looked very much alike. Most of them spoke no Spanish, but a little French, German and English instead, which they had picked up from the boats that have come here so infrequently during the last twenty years.

Natives Beg for Wine

Day in and day out, while we were lying at anchor in the channel, the natives came on board by dozens, lounging all over the deck, frequently begging wine, whisky and cigarettes from the store chest. "Good morning, how are you?" they would say. And then, "Have you any cigars?" They encountered me in a corner, whispered mysteriously and showed some sort of stone carving—an obsidian spearhead or a little statuette—to trade for wine. If one declined them, they grumbled incoherently and slouched off, speaking a language which sounded nasal and which was mixed occasionally with European phrases. They hate to work, and it is with difficulty that they ever adjust themselves to doing it. They can at least afford to be lazy, for Rapanui's soil is rich enough to bear plenty of bananas, corn, sugar cane and sweet potatoes. It is true, there is neither wine nor whisky on the island for the English company fought against its introduction with all the resources at its command.

Although Rapanui is still a Chilean colony in name, the English have a controlling interest there. It is more a desire to care for a helpless child, on the part of Chile, than it is to exploit the island, for the sum which the English pay for their operations there is said to be small. The island is too far from Chile to gain any cultural benefit from her.

A physician is unknown there, and so is a clergyman, and the last teacher who knew both languages—Spanish and the native language – died a year and a half ago. The sole cultural factor which can be taken into consideration is the annual steamer which distributes Juan Tepano liquor, Carlos Teao whisky, Matheo beri-beri and many bottles of Pisco wine among them.

People Trace Origin to Tahiti

The people on the island seemed to tend more to the Polynesian type than to the South American. Tahiti is bound up more closely with their lives than Chile, although really much farther away geographically. Evidently they must have come from Tahiti centuries ago, in tiny hand-made canoes, fashioned with stone tools. Indeed, a marvelous accomplishment nautically; more so, perhaps, than those of the Spaniards or the Vikings who conquered the Atlantic long before Columbus' time.

The people on the shore seemed to be sympathetic race who had nothing in common with those who swarmed on board our ship crying for alcohol. A lively, intelligent people who have, however, a mere surface polish of culture. About 250 of them live in neat little houses copied after the European patterns for the most part constructed from wood or corrugated sheet iron. Along the roof of each house there runs an eave trough which empties in a stone tank in the ground. These are for rain water, for there is little surface water in Rapanui. Well kept gardens set off each one of the premises, with many-colored flowers, vegetables, fruit and occasional palm and pine trees and pineapple groves, blooming in them. The English manager and his family lived off by themselves, a half hour's ride farther south, and, farther still, fifty Kanakas lived scattered throughout the interior, kept there by the company as ranchers.

Old Church on Island

A modest little wooden church stands in the middle of the village on one of the rows of tree-lined streets, which has been named Calle Banqudano [*sic:Baquedano*], after a Chilean warship. The Kanakas gallop their horses down this street all day long. Every one owns at least one horse. There is always work for those who want it as long as the annual ship from Valparaíso is in port.

Through a Monsieur Pont, an elderly Frenchman from Brest, I visited one of the native rulers, Veronika Mahute, who is reputed to be 112 years old. She was seated in a squalid little hovel on a bundle of straw, sick and prostrate.

In order to prolong the visit, I offered the queen a cigarette, for her majesty was exceedingly wroth at the Frenchman for having invaded her home. She shook her head and murmured a "neche neche!"

"She means to say 'delicious'" interpreted M. Pont. "She appreciates that very much!" And with the assistance of my interpreter, I expressed my pleasure at meeting her and all the people of Hanga Roa, and withdrew.

In the following article, the second of a series, Heinz Hell, a German newspaper man who traveled to Easter Island, 2,000 miles off the coast of Chile, aboard the vessel which visits the island once a year, tells of the huge statues carved from volcanic ash, the origin of which has never been explained by archeologists.

On Easter Island it costs a bottle of wine and three Chilean pesos or 36 pfennigs in German money (about 7 cents) to rent a horse for a day. This was so little that as many as could leave the ship formed a troop to roam the island, which is only 118 kilometers square. The troop of more than thirty horsemen was made up chiefly of Kanakas, who came in the hope that it would mean alcohol to drink and roasted mutton to eat.

Barbecued mutton it had to be because that is one of the requisites of a gentlemanly party held on Chilean ground. The horse's tack is hardly elaborate. A coverlet over which is buckled a sort of iron shield serves for the saddle; fragile cords are used for the stirrup straps and a similar cord for the snaffle. Galloping, which suits the style of the Kanakas perfectly, we went from Hanga Roa toward the east, passing by the obsidian stone quarries from which the old Easter Islanders obtained the material for their spear points and knives. Our journey took us over the level, grass-grown plain. This plain arched gradually to the north of the peak of the Rano Aroi, which rises 1,800 feet high – the highest point on the island.

Rides behind Troopers

The other troopers had galloped ahead, I followed them more slowly, taking pains, however, not to lose sight of them.

I had ridden along this way for three hours. Once, far off toward the south, I caught a glimpse of the sea, which suddenly disappeared again behind a little hill. I struck up a trot, for the others had ridden far beyond me and now appeared as tiny dots.

The troop had gone on ahead to take care that everything was well prepared. As we came into the valley from out of the tip of the crater, rising straight up for 560 feet, a lovely fragrance met our nostrils. The mutton was roasting slowly.

Carefully I rode on farther, uphill over the rich earth, over the ruins of houses once constructed from lava and stone. Suddenly I stopped my horse, amazed by the view ahead of me. Everywhere stood dozens of the idols staring out of the gray antiquity – this mystery of Easter Island, the old Rapanui. I had seen photographs of this scene; viewed in a museum the statues which had been brought from here, causing many scientific speculations on the purpose and skill of their builders. But I had never considered before from where these idols, so magnificent, so full of eternal silence as they stood there so enigmatically, had come. The giant grassy prairies, the depth of the calm ocean in the background, all forming a picture framed by the giant figures – witnesses of a by-gone era about which we know so little.

Who were the men who built these statues? Why did they do it? Who knocked down the others, lying scattered all over the island, with their faces pressed to the ground? Some say an earthquake, others, a war between separate tribes on the island. No one really knows. Whoever stands where I was at that moment only knows that this is a consecrated place, a place of worship for those who once lived and worked here. I looked up the slope to the very tip of the volcano, above the statues, where there were yet other figures in various stages of completion, cradled in the mountains. (One of them measured seventy-five feet). One above another they had been wrought out of the lava with the primitive stone tools which are still to be found here and there on the ground.

The ancient myth which the Kanakas relate today and which is sufficient explanation for them runs like this: Once there lived a cook on the rim of the volcano who prepared food for the sculptors, and aided by her magic power, helped create the complete figures wherever she happened to be. (How else, indeed, could such huge things have been moved?) One day – the cook was away on an errand – the people brought in from the sea, the body of a delectable shellfish, which the artists, in their greed, seized upon in a voracious manner, eating it up without leaving so much as a tiny piece. The cook returned from her outing, saw the clean shell, and was overcome with grief at the selfishness of the sculptors. She immediately summoned her magic powers and ordered all the idols round about town torn down. The work of the stonecarvers was suddenly interrupted never to be resumed again – so the Kanakas say.

Succeeding in reaching the top of the crater I saw statues here too, with serious, empty eyes staring over the rim to the endless sweep of the sea beyond. Indeed an unsolved mystery. Mrs. Routledge, an English explorer, remained here for sixteen months in 1914-1915 as the last member of an expedition, to find such a solution, but she wasn't successful. Many have attempted to clear away the mystery, and they have succeeded in explaining a few odds and ends out of the medley of tales and facts, but the ultimate conclusions remain forever hidden from them.

The older Kanakas who lived within the memory of their fathers are for the most part dead. The younger generation knows no more than we do about the writing tablets of their ancestor, and they neglected the stone-made idols or, frightened by superstitions, they carve silly, clumsy imitations of this traditional sacred art to satisfy their craving for a bottle of wine or an old pair of trousers.

The sun had already sunk in a copperish glow behind Rapanui's green horizon. The cool wind blew in from the ocean over the grass. The other members of the party had ridden on ahead some little time ago and it was time for me, too to start homeward. Should I ever return to this place again? It was hardly likely because my days here were carefully apportioned and there were so many other things to see in Rapanui.

In the final article describing his trip to Easter Island, 2000 miles off the coast of Chile, aboard the vessel which visits the island once a year, Heinz Hell, German newspaper man, tells of his trip to the caves of ancient bird worshipers and the leper colony of the island.

One day M. Pont, the old Frenchman from Brest, brought me an insignificant-looking swallow's egg. He held it carefully in both hands, pointing with a nod of his chin in the direction of Rano Kao volcano and remarking rather dramatically, "A Manu-tara from Motu nui!"

I knew that "Motu nui" was one of the little islands lying off the southern shore of Rapanui, and also that here

an egg had played an especially important part in the lives of the Polynesians. So I decided to pay a visit to Orongo, where bird-worship had its origin.

This time I rode unaccompanied, toward the slope of Rano Kau, on whose southern boundary Orongo lies. After fifteen minutes I passed Mataveri, the headquarters of the managers of the ranches. It was quite an attractive lodge, with a garden and a little park and many well kept building.

Distances are Deceptive

Directly behind Mataveri stretch out the grassy plains, sweeping on and on in gentle curves, sometimes rising 1,500 feet. Distances out here are most deceptive. After riding for two hours toward a certain goal it may be found still to be quite a distance away.

When one rides down from the north he does not expect to find a volcano until he suddenly finds himself standing in front of it. The crater is 3,800 feet across—a circular cavern with almost perpendicular sides and the whole scene giving a bizarre and weird appearance. The ocean has nibbled away a piece of the crater in one place. As one stands way up here, 1,300 feet high, glancing down, he sees the island looking very much like a dead green-shadowed eye, with here and there a glittering patch of land, apparently little lakes which look more like mud puddles. The sun shines on one part of the land while the other part, toward the south, lies in deep shadow. It is a dismal place.

I proceeded toward the south where the strip between the crater and the sea became narrower and considerably stonier. I left my horse to graze on the verdant slope and went on foot until I came upon a hut built from piled up stones and covered over with pieces of lava. The narrow entrance way gave it the appearance of a cave. It was here that Orongo, the age-old settlement of "Ao," was founded by the prophets for the purpose of engaging in bird worship.

Finds Fifty Caves

I counted more than fifty such stony caves, oftentimes sunken deep into the rock. Their interiors were bare, with neither frescoes nor murals. (Only one hut, farther down, had such a painting – one in mineral colors of cannibals.)

Where crater and sea met one another, there was a most interesting spot of all – the dwelling place of the wise men, the Rongo-Rongo men. It was oddly constructed and furnished with reliefs on stone blocks, all with variations of the same theme.

"A crouching figure with the head of a large bird and the body of a man; long, outstretched claws clinging to something round," wrote Mrs. Routledge, the English explorer. The scenery around about me was phantastic enough without this. I felt the age-old pictures with my hands, leaned against them and looked out to the distances beyond, far out over the endless sea which glistened now in the sun, sparkling and blue. I could see both of the islands – Motu iti and Motu nui—through the misty white foam of the waves as they dashed against their rocky shores. It was from Motu nui, the larger one of the two, that M. Pont's egg had come, and over which he had become so philosophical. It was here that the holy bird-worshipping cult had originated.

Over to this point swam the "Hopu," the servants of the cult, who were ordained to succeed to the great honor of being birdmen, permitted by the honorable god Make-Make to find the egg which in his opinion was the one most suitable and worthy.

And once the egg was found – the little insignificant sea-swallow's egg – the first one of the year, then a rousing bacchanalian procession commenced. At its head, the new birdman, marching along the coast to the east as far as Rano Raraku, where the great stone idols stand, in whose shadows the "Champion" would pass five lonely months secluded from society.

Cult a Mystery

Sitting down in the midst of these sacred ruins of Orongo, I reflected on these things and wondered at their queer beliefs. Where did the whole idea of this cult come from, this ritual and formality, the month-long privations prior to the discovery of the first egg of the year? It was indeed the same sort of a mystery as that of the giant idols of Rano Raraku, really unsolvable because all of the hypotheses upon which we might be able to base our deductions have been lost to our generation. Mrs. Routledge maintained, on the basis of the stories told by old people, that these Orongo people were linked up with the stone idols and that perhaps these were the statues of earlier birdmen. But who knows? No one has proved this, and anyway, does it bring us any closer to a solution of the age-old problem: to a satisfactory solution of the whole mystery? Stepping back again over the little rocky neck of land, I took a last look at the basreliefs and the primitive caves.

My horse was waiting for his rider, not far away, peacefully munching the luxuriant grass. I had not yet tasted the swallow's egg, although it had been warmly recommended to me as a delectable morsel. I had it carefully blown out and packed away in a satchel, where it will remain until I am back again in Germany and can find time on a long evening to let my thoughts wander back again to the strange people of Orongo and the egg-god Make-Make who bestowed this treasure upon me.

Visits Leper Colony

During my stay at Hanga Roa I asked permission to visit the leper colony on the island. "At your own risk," said the doctor to me when I begged him to take me to see the people suffering from leprosy. "Its positively dangerous; you will do well to provide yourself with some protection against the flies. You better not go, really." "And how about you, doctor?" I asked.

"I haven't any choice in the matter," he said. "I am on call at all times and it is my duty to help any one I can. I

will be reasonably safe with my rubber gloves and face mask."

We rode on, the two of us, with a Kanaka as a guide. The leper colony on Rapanui was situated about a mile to the north of Hanga Roa, completely isolated and not far from the sea. No one from the village dared go there: a young boy takes out the meat and, if there happens to be any on hand, the medical supplies, every morning. He puts everything in a so-called 'neutral spot' from where the lepers later collect it.

On the way the Kanaka tried out the spray gun both on the doctor and me, whenever we were tormented with flies. It killed them admirably. Suddenly there appeared from behind a little hill a woman. She was one of the sick people whose illness had not been definitely determined as leprosy. There were more of them living in a "middle zone" of rocky grottoes, which was a short distance both from the village proper and the central colony.

Sick Beg Cigarettes

The Kanaka started the spray gun working and interpreted the physician's questions. Then the poor woman accepted a little package of gauze bandages and we rode on to the next "cave." Here the sick people begged me pitifully for cigarettes. I threw them a package in the grass and they came and picked them up. "Muchas gracias, senor!" they said.

When we reached the top of a hill which sloped off toward the sea we saw in the distance the leper colony. We came to a gate in a stone wall, left the horses behind and stepped into dangerous territory. The colony was full of excitement, wondering who it could be to approach them in this way. There were sitting on the veranda which ran around the small, two-story house, yelling and making unintelligible noises. The Kanaka explained to them the purpose of our visit. The doctor put on his face mask and rubber gloves and, with the spray gun working to drive away the flies, took from his knapsack the bandages and medicines which he had brought with him. I doubted very much whether he would be able to be of much help to them. He was an eye specialist with a good practice in Valparaíso and had been asked to deliver these materials to the leper colony at Rapanui. I feared that that would be all the good he could do them.

Eighteen in Colony

The patients followed the proceeding with evident interest. About eighteen people lived here, which made up more than 5 per cent of the island's population. Some of them did not appear ill; others were more seriously affected. The last newcomer to the colony was a fifteen-year-old girl who arrived three months ago. They accept their misfortune stoically and engage themselves in cultivating the land around their "home."

The doctor and I distributed our cigarettes and a few pieces of wearing apparel among them, then we rode back again.